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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8199
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1541
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5028
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8623
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6192
RHMMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4048
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2013
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000752

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/23/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BM

SUBJECT: BURMA: SOME POLITICAL PRISONERS FREED IN AMNESTY

Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) On September 23, the Burmese government announced it would release 9,002 prisoners as part of a general amnesty, but did not reveal which prisoners or prisons would be included. Our contacts confirm that at least seven political prisoners have already been released, including prominent journalist and long-time detainee Win Tin. Legal sources point out that past amnesty programs normally released only those with little time remaining on their sentences, and predict this one will primarily involve minor habitual criminals. There is much unconfirmed speculation as to the reasons behind the amnesty, including rumors Than Shwe acted on the advice of his astrologers. End Summary.

Seven activists confirmed released

¶2. (C) Opposition lawyers and NLD sources report that as at least seven political prisoners, including prominent journalist Win Tin, have been released as part of a general amnesty announced by the regime on September 23. In addition to Win Tin, we have confirmed that the following political prisoners were released: MP-elect Dr. May Win Myint, MP-elect Dr. Than Nyein, MP-elect Aung Soe Myint, Aung San Suu Kyi's former assistant Win Htein, former NLD Central Executive Committee member Khin Maung Swe, and NLD member Aye Thein. Eyewitnesses told us that they have seen all seven outside of prison, and that they appear to be in good health.

¶3. (U) Win Tin is among Burma's most prominent, and longest-held, political prisoners. The 78-year-old journalist has been in prison since 1989 and was due to be released next year. He reportedly suffered two heart attacks and was treated for high blood pressure while in prison. Upon his release yesterday, Win Tin told the press that he would "continue with the unfinished task of trying to achieve democracy in Myanmar." UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Ojea-Quintana met Win Tin during his visit in August.

Most on the list: presumably habitual criminals

¶4. (C) Our contacts in the legal community point out that

similar amnesty programs in the past normally released only those with little time remaining on their sentences, and rarely involved political prisoners. Despite the inclusion of at least seven political prisoners, most legal observers and opposition activists expect the vast majority of those released this time will be habitual criminals.

Speculation about motives

¶15. (C) On September 23, the regime-mouthpiece New Light of Myanmar newspaper announced the government would release 9,002 prisoners for the "social consideration of their families" and to allow them to participate in the "fair election to be held in 2010...after realizing the government's loving kindness and goodwill." The announcement did not, however, provide any additional information regarding those to be freed or the reasons for their release.

There has been much speculation as to the reason for the amnesty and choice of prisoners released. Some of our contacts believe that the regime chose to announce the amnesty and include political prisoners such as Win Tin to curry favor during the UN General Assembly. Others speculate the regime no longer sees Win Tin and the other prisoners as a threat now that the constitution has been approved and elections scheduled. Others relayed rumors that Than Shwe's fortune tellers warned him he would die in 2009 and encouraged him to release the inverted number of 9,002 prisoners to ward off bad omens.

Comment

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¶16. (C) It is not known whether this amnesty was a calculated political move or a superstitious act based on the advice of soothsayers. Whatever the reason, the public reaction has been a mix of happiness for those released and cynicism regarding the government's motives. We will try to track what types of prisoners are released to get a better sense of the amnesty, but the regime's motives in this case - as in so many others - will likely remain opaque. End Comment.

DINGER